The Traditional, Modern, and Natural: A Study of
Nordic Architecture Through the Works of Sverre Fehn

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More or Less: Architectural Theory from Modern to Contemporary
This paper will talk about the main characteristics of Nordic architecture, specifically emphasizing the Norwegian style through the architect Sverre Fehn. The paper will look at Sverre Fehn's work, highlighting and analyzing the Ivar Aasen Museum and the way modern and traditional, natural and historic elements are tied into the design of the museum. It will also talk about what it is like to have a first-hand experience with working in a Fehn-building.

During the 1950s, modernism reappeared as the dominating style in Norway after being absent since the 1930s. In the years following World War II, modernism was aggressively promoted by the PAGON group, where Arne Korsmo and Christian Nordberg-Schultz were the two leading figures. Several young architects, including Pritzker Prize-winner Sverre Fehn, joined PAGON. Their goal was to carry forward the functional CIAM-ideas (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) from the interwar period. CIAM was a group of modern architects who tried to promote and further develop their theories on urban life, space and affiliation. PAGON was formed in the 1950s, but despite its short existence, the architects gained great influence through
magazines and architectural unions, and modernism was becoming more appreciated in Norway.¹

Norwegian postwar architecture went from being characterized as romantic mansions to the social democratic “folkehjemmet”, a synthesis between the nationalistic and the simple, the functional and the functionalistic.² The simple and refined motifs from the Norwegian tradition is communicated by a traditional form—the houses are built for use in practicality and pleasure in everyday life rather than being admired as an avant-garde piece of art. As simple architectural arrangements, Norwegian houses create a transition between the private and public in that it gives the effect of an inviting space, yet within a shielded outdoor space.

Wenche Selmer may be one of the most well known Norwegian architects, first and foremost because of her distinct use of both the traditional and the modern, the local and the natural. She simplified and refined forms and motifs from the Norwegian panel-house tradition in a simple architecture free of the monumental features that can be found in designs by Nordic architects Poulsson and Arneberg.³

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We see this use of simple architectural arrangements in Wenche Selmer’s works such as her first summerhouse commission on the small island Fjelldalsøya near Brekkestø in 1953. The house is traditional in the sense that it is a small wooden house with steep pitched roofs settled, together with many similarly designed summerhouses, either grouped in small clusters or as tiny villages along the Norwegian coastline. Selmer related the house to its surroundings, in particular highlighting and defining the side to make it more friendly and welcoming. There is no exaggerated boundary or distinction between the private and the public space; it is rather articulated carefully by hints of mediation such as a bush, a fence or a piece of rock.

The Beach House project by Wenche Selmer and her husband, Jens combines and fulfills their needs: Jens Selmer’s technical and inventive abilities and Wenche Selmer’s sensibility for a family’s need and the role of the house and its surroundings. It is traditional in that it plays the role of a typical Norwegian family’s summerhouse by the ocean or the fjord, yet it is modern in its high architectural quality, variation and flexibility. The Beach House is close to nature in its spatial connections and inviting accesses, and

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has elements that are designed and highly important for the clients and their usage.

Wood, such as pine and spruce are the dominating material in Selmer’s, Fehn’s and many other Nordic architects. That the wood could be obtained locally and that the local builders knew how to handle it were highly appreciated. From the 1960s and up until today, there have been many experimental uses of both new and old materials in light of modern architecture, but Fehn has somehow always been loyal towards Nordic materials. Fehn often uses concrete, which is not a typically traditional material, but as he combines it with pine and oak he stays true to the Nordic style. Even though concrete can be seen as a modern material, it can in a way relate to, or be a symbol of stone used in a traditional manner in the Norwegian building construction in the 18th and 19th century.

Critical regionalism is a term that was coined in the architectural debate of the last decades by, among others, the architectural theorist and historian Kenneth Frampton. The idea is to integrate the influence from the universal civilization in an architecture that originates from characteristics of a particular place. It finds its inspiration in elements such as natural light in a place; in a specific method of building; in tectonics, or in the topography of a

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given area. This can be tied to the Ivar Aasen Museum and the way Sverre Fehn integrates both natural and historical elements specific to that area into the design. Natural in the way Fehn has used the nature as a starting point in his design, and historical in the sense that the museum is placed on Ivar Aasen’s homestead. Therefore, you get a more direct connection with the history and the inspiration behind the creation of the New Norwegian language.

Scandinavian architects try to seize upon the Nordic light and dramatic climate as a source of identity and inspiration. In the summer, the daylight stays bright from early morning to late at night, while in the winter; the light is only out for a couple of hours a day. This dramatic change in light from summer to winter is very much influenced in the Nordic architectural style. Architectural forms are constantly developed that are closely connected and captivated by natural light, as people from the North appreciate the daylight and never take it for granted. Therefore, building plans and sections aim to a specific point on the horizon and try to conduct captured light to rooms where it is most needed. One example of this is Sverre Fehn’s Glacier Museum in Norway. The museum has sharp, angular

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shapes that suggest the forms of the surrounding landscape. Two massive stairways lead to a rooftop looking over the surroundings. The windows of the museum have large mitered glass that creates the effect of fractured sunlight, but changes the interior based on the hour of the day, and stands out in contrast to the heavy concrete.

Another characteristic of Scandinavian architecture is the use of pale materials to conserve and magnify the illusion of brightness\textsuperscript{11}, as well an urge to live in close relation or communion with nature, as nature plays a major role in the Norwegian culture and everyday life. The whiteness that is often present in Scandinavian architecture is also a response to the arctic climate: it is a natural contrast to the dark winter and the shifting moods of the hours and seasons, and can be linked to the snow-covered landscapes.\textsuperscript{12} Integrating nature into the structure or design also means using natural materials such as timber to draw upon primitive memories of the forest and its role in Nordic tradition. The forest is where people lived and worked, and where they found the raw materials for their dwellings, furniture, boats and toys. Always more than a commodity, wood was considered a living material, permeated with myth and folklore, and treated in a manner that reveals and celebrates its innate structure.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Bredsdorff, Thomas, Søren Peter. Hansen, and Anne-Marie Mai. \textit{Nordic Light}. Odense: U of
Rather than merely opening buildings to nature and its constant change, a more profound relationship is sought by integrating the force of nature into the space and structure of buildings.14

Sverre Fehn (1924-2009) has long been recognized as one of Norway's most gifted modern architects, but does not see himself as modern: "I have never thought of myself as modern, but I did absorb the anti-monumental and the pictorial world of Le Corbusier, as well as the functionalism of the small village in North Africa. You might say I came of age in the shadow of modernism." At the age of 72, Sverre Fehn won The Pritzker Architecture Prize, and the jury described Fehn's architecture as “...a fascinating and exciting combination of modern forms tempered by the Scandinavian tradition...”

“I always thought I was running away from traditional Norwegian architecture, but I soon realized that I was operating within its context. How I interpret the site of a project, the light, and the building materials have a strong relationship to my origins.”

– Pritzker Prize Interview with Sverre Fehn, 1997

Fehn was born in Kongsberg in 1924, and attended the Oslo School of Architecture and graduated in 1949. He lived in Paris in 1953 and 1954 after receiving the French State Scholarship. While in Paris, he studied with the French architect Jean Prouvé and was introduced to the work of Le Corbusier. He was highly inspired by Moroccan architecture after having traveled there for his studies in 1952. Some of Fehn’s most well known works are The Nordic Pavilion in Venice from 1962 and Hedmarksmuseet in Hamar, Norway, in addition to several private houses such as Villa Schreiner in Oslo and Villa Busk in Telemark, Norway.

Norway possesses the most complex and dramatic nature of the countries in the North. Construction is emphasized so built works can represent the surroundings, and Norwegian architecture has its origin in a combination of stave and log construction. Norwegian traditions can be traced from medieval stave churches through folk architecture, national romanticism’s dragon style, and functionalism’s concrete skeletons to Fehn’s characteristic symbiosis of wood and masonry.15 *Mellom himmel og jord* – between earth and sky – is the space of architecture, the Norwegian mellomrom, the “space between.” Sverre Fehn’s architecture is a search for a mellomrom, to which he assigns specific characteristics by manipulating horizontal limits. This creates a dialectic relationship—similar to what occurs

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in nature—between the ground plane and the roof plane. This dialectic between the plane on which life takes place and the one that protects it is at the origin of structural form, and it is what we call architecture.\textsuperscript{16}

Several years before the 1995 Norwegian parliament decided that the Ivar Aasen Museum would be built, the Minister of Culture, Åse Kleveland desired Sverre Fehn to design the new museum. At the time, Fehn was radical, but for those who generated the museum, he was ideal: the New Norwegian language was modern and radical. Fehn typically worked on private projects, such as the Glacier Museum (1991) and multiple villas, while he was highly celebrated internationally. When the project of the new Ivar Aasen museum immersed, politicians saw the possibility of giving Fehn a public mission.

The Ivar Aasen museum is a cultural center and museum for the New Norwegian language and the history of Ivar Aasen, and his journey to create a new national language, based on Norwegian dialects. Ivar Aasen's goal was to replace the heavily Danish influence on the language with an independent language specifically for Norwegians.

*Fehn has built some of the most remarkable museums in the world, but the very idea of a museum troubles him. He considers the museum an instrument of a society that denies death and overvalues material things; he is convinced that this secular age has transferred the idea of immortality to objects, conferring on them a special power; that we give to museums the position and respect accorded to cathedrals in earlier*
times. But this has not kept him from creating buildings for this purpose
that redefine the museum’s role in the modern world.

- Excerpt from *The Paradox of Sverre Fehn for The Pritzker Architecture Prize*, by Ada Louise Huxtable

The museum is located on a hillside in a rural area between two towns on the West Coast of Norway: Ørsta and Volda. You take off from the highway, and park your car before you walk up the hill. While you are walking up the hill, you see the front of the building: first the exhibition with large windows covering the walls, then the auditorium, which from the outside looks like a large book in concrete with Ivar Aasen's autograph attached to the wall. You walk further, and arrive at the main entrance, but you are also standing between the old museum, Ivar Aasen's homestead, and the new museum. The entrance of the new museum is a glass wall with a curved turf roof, creating a feeling of the building being built into or in one with the hillside. The glass wall looks into the museum café, and when you go inside, you step into the reception and museum store, which also is a hallway into the exhibition. In the reception, there are two Moroccan-inspired columns that support the space between the ground and the tall roof. Past the reception you enter into the main exhibition, which portrays and tells the story of Ivar Aasen's journey to create the New Norwegian language.
Fehn already curates small details in the exhibition, such as the large windows and what looks like large upside-down triangles that portray an open book. The exhibition begins with the death of Ivar Aasen: an uncommon way to introduce a historic exhibition, however, it shows the importance of Aasen’s work and his historically major role in Norway in the early 1800s. When we take our visitors on a tour, we often show them Aasen’s obituary and its symbolic meaning: it covered the front page of Norway’s largest newspaper and celebrates his important work. In the exhibition, it is enlarged in a glass box on the floor, underneath one of the few portraits that exists of Ivar Aasen, a painting by Lars Osa. The exhibition is divided in two
parts: the right hand side is on languages and the role of the New Norwegian language in Norwegian culture and society, while on the left hand side you find the history of Ivar Aasen and his journey in creating the New Norwegian language. The exhibition is formed as a hallway, and from the reception you see straight through the exhibition and out towards the mountains. In the end of the exhibition there are large glass windows that look down towards the library. By the glass windows there is a small staircase that takes you to the basement where the staff’s offices are located. From here, you can walk through the corridor of offices and up the stairs that takes you back to the reception. All the walls in the building are concrete, but are casted in wood to create a softer and more natural look.

In the museum, Sverre Fehn tells a story. Not only has he designed the building, but also much of the interior. The building is designed in a L-shaped plan, and is elongated on two floors rather than built upwards, thus blending in more naturally with the hillside it is built on, or rather into: the arched turf roof automatically blends in with the hillside. The natural materials Sverre Fehn has used vary from woods, such as pine and oak, to concrete. The concrete is casted in wood, giving the heavy material a more natural look, a common technique in Fehn’s architecture. The elongated plan also symbolizes Aasen’s long travel, both physically and psychologically, to create the language that would reinforce Norway as an independent country. When one stands in the main entrance of the building, the other end of the building
is clearly visible. Here, Fehn tried to induce the vision of a road, as the main road previously intersected through the farmyard when Aasen grew up.

Light underscores the function of the museum; it is a specific mission for the museum. It can also be used as a metaphor of bringing light to the story of the New Norwegian language. It enlightens people in literacy, the language and the story. It uses Ivar Aasen’s homestead as a literal representation, and the museum as a functional representation.

In his opening speech of the new museum, Fehn explained that the library in the building is hidden in the ground, just like our brains are hidden in our craniums—the thoughts in the books are well protected in the ground.

As mentioned earlier, Fehn was highly influenced by the architecture he saw when traveling in Morocco between 1952 and 1953, and the Bauhaus architect Le Corbusier while working in Paris from 1953 to 1954. We see these influences in the museum: the columns in the reception and café are Moroccan-inspired, and the windows that fill the arch facing Aasen’s childhood farm and home bring natural light into the reception area and a direct attachment to Aasen’s home and new museum. The windows are oblique, symbolizing Aasen glancing out toward the fjord.

In the actual exhibition, direct sunlight through a high row of windows creates a feeling of being in direct contact with nature. It is important to mention that Ivar Aasen was highly inspired by his hometown’s mountains, fjords and nature in his writings. Fehn desired to capture this childhood
inspiration in the new museum. The exhibition is essentially as a timeline of Aasen’s journey in creation of the New Norwegian language.

Fehn blends Modernist ideals with a sensibility towards the landscape and Norwegian building traditions, context, climate and place, creating concepts from the given landscape to construct a sense of place and belonging.¹⁷ For Fehn, the most important part of architecture is the construction; rather it is wood or concrete, and harmony, rhythm, and honesty in the use of those materials.¹⁸

There is a certain clarity that underlies the characteristic qualities of Fehn’s work, where we often see a continuous dialogue between the exterior and interior. Through my first-hand experience of working in a building designed by Fehn, it is important to recognize that there is a calm and pleasant mood in his architecture, emphasized by natural colors, open floor plans and smart lighting. These elements create a close-to-nature atmosphere that is hard to capture anywhere else. What is special about the Ivar Aasen Museum, is its small and personal characteristics and curiosities: in the basement by the dressing rooms, there are traces from a cat walking on the cement that was in the process of drying while the museum was being built: a marble plate with a short text written in New Norwegian covers a scratch in the concrete on the stairway down to the basement, and Fehn has

¹⁷ Mings, John, “The Story of Building Sverre Fehn’s Museums”
left his characteristic signature in a small corner of the building; a self-drawn Pegasus.

It is natural to assume that most of Fehn’s work was inspired by nature, but he was also deeply influenced by urban settings. He taught many lectures at the School of Design and Architecture in Oslo, where he often spoke about the aspects of Manhattan as a metropolitan. It is thus fascinating that he balanced his interest in cities with nature, as he designed buildings on a farmyard in a rural area of Norway.

The uniqueness of the Ivar Aasen Museum is something that never grows old, and as the director of the New Norwegian cultural department explains it, “Everyday I see details in the building that I have never noticed before. It should not be possible as this is a minimalistic building, but it might have something to do with the relationship between the details and the entirety.” It is a democratic building as rooms specific to the audience merge with rooms prescribed for the individual. The offices in the basement are all the same size; even the employees’ wardrobe is as nice as the practitioners’ wardrobe, which creates a great working environment for everyone.

Light underscores the function of the museum, and it has a specific mission; it brings light to the story and enlightens people in the literacy. Not only does the museum represent the New Norwegian language, but also Aasen’s homestead and the nature surrounding it. His homestead can be seen
as a literal representation, while the new museum can be seen as a functional representation.

We have seen that Norwegian postwar architecture went from being characterized as romantic mansions to the social democratic “folkehemmet”, a dominating theme that also reoccurs in the Ivar Aasen Museum where the space is democratic in the sense that every room is built in the exact same style with the same materials. There are no differences in the way that space is treated between the private and public areas of the museum: the offices are the exact same size regardless of the user’s position. Another reoccurring theme in Norwegian architecture is the mix of traditional Norwegian values and functional and practical solutions together with the use of local and natural materials such as wood and concrete. However, what might be one of the most important characteristics of Scandinavian architecture is the way in which nature is merged into the design of a building, and this is why I have used the Ivar Aasen Museum as an example of this in specific. The museum mixes the old with the new quite literally as the new museum by Sverre Fehn is built right next to Ivar Aasen’s homestead. What is so special about the placement of the museum is that when you visit it, you get the impression that you can easier embody the time that Ivar Aasen spent on his homestead, and the inspiration behind many of his works and his process in creating the New Norwegian language.
Scandinavian architecture is very distinct and characteristic in its style, therefore, this paper is not only written because I myself am Scandinavian, but also because of the unique ways in which its architecture merges in nature and its surroundings which makes it immensely interesting in terms of both the aesthetic and the practicality of a building.

Works Cited


